

Rooms 1–2, 5–7: Franz Gertsch. Portraits and Nature Pieces II

Introduction

During this exhibition period, large-format paintings and woodcuts by Franz Gertsch can be seen at the Museum Franz Gertsch. The exhibition focuses on portraits and nature pieces.

Room 1 – “Silvia I” and Grasses

After an almost ten-year pause during which he occupied himself exclusively with woodcuts, Franz Gertsch renewed his work in the medium of painting in **“Gräser I” [Grasses I] (1995/96)**. It depicts a considerably enlarged detail of a reed-like grass (false-brome) that grew in his garden at Rüschegg. Viewed from a distance, the painting still seems to be closely tied to photorealism, and in fact the viewer can easily imagine that he is looking at a glossy photograph. Seen from up close, however, it becomes evident that the work involves a painting executed in mineral pigments with a dammar resin and beeswax binder on an unprimed cotton support. As opposed to his earlier paintings from the time before his intense woodcut phase that lasted from around 1986 to 1994, for example **‘Johanna I’ (1983/84)**, paint is applied here more generously and extensively; several passages of the canvas appear almost untouched. In this work, the artist began distancing himself from the photorealistic style of painting with which he attracted international recognition in the 1970s. The other paintings reference and proceed from this ‘mother picture’.

While **“Gräser III” [Grasses III] (1997)** shows a detail from ‘Gräser I’, the detail in **“Gräser II” [Grasses II] (1996/97)** is inverted. In both works, the leaves of grass are enlarged to a monumental format.

The colour scheme of **“Gräser IV” [Grasses IV] (1998/99)** is lighter and the painting also addresses the theme of photographic exposure. Franz Gertsch made no effort to conceal the fact that he was working from photographic models. On the contrary. Existing unfocused passages found their way into his paintings. In this series, Gertsch pursued a conceptual way of dealing with his own painting style by enlarging the first picture and playing with details and exposures.

The young girl Silvia appears like a figure from earlier times. Franz Gertsch is already pursuing the theme of time here, albeit in the sense of timelessness and not yet with a view to the cyclical passage of time. His paintings from the 1970s and 1980s are very much children of their time and one immediately senses the zeitgeist of these decades that are visibly evident in the fashion, hairstyles and furnishings. **“Silvia I” (1998)** is different. The girl is shown wearing a simple cotton shirt against a mid blue backdrop. She is not wearing conspicuous make-up and her hair is simply pulled back behind her head. The question about which decade she comes from is not easily answerable. The artist has created a striking portrait here that references the high point of portraiture in the Renaissance. Gertsch similarly went back in time for his technique. Like the medieval fresco painter, he

worked on a small passage of the picture every day, proceeding in this manner using egg tempera as his painting medium until the work was completed.

Room 2 – ‘Johanna I’ and Woodcuts

The painting **“Johanna I” (1983/84)** is the penultimate work in a series of women’s portraits from 1980s that followed upon a self-portrait of the artist. The sitter is the then circa 20-year-old daughter of a now deceased Viennese publisher, editor and art collector. Franz Gertsch is at the height of his photorealistic phase here. The silhouette of the delicately made-up young woman with light brown hair appears against a neutral background. Johanna looks somewhat provocatively at the viewer. The perfection of her beauty and that of the picture’s painterly execution creates a feeling of remoteness and aloofness. While this portrait can easily be dated to the nineteen eighties by means of the typical fashion styles and make-up, Franz Gertsch lessened such time-bound aspects in later portraits of women, e.g. **“Silvia I” (1998)**. He subsequently painted **“Johanna II” (1985)**, which is now in the Hess Collection in Napa, California.

In the mid 1980s, Franz Gertsch ventured a step in the direction of a new means of artistic expression.

As the artist himself has stated:

“I am frequently asked about how I went from painting to the woodcut and the only thing that I can say is that while working on the last painting, ‘Johanna II,’ I kept on thinking to myself: ‘I

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Rooms 1–2, 5–7: Franz Gertsch. Portraits and Nature Pieces II

want to make woodcuts.’ It is often the case in my work that I select the most unsuitable means in order to present myself a challenge. There is really nothing more unsuitable than the woodcut to realize chiaroscuro effects and the modelling of light, i.e. three-dimensionality. About six months passed between the wish and the work on the first woodcut. I lay awake night after night and kept on asking myself: ‘How can I realize my vision of a woodcut?’” (Trans. from Franz Gertsch in the catalogue “Rehau. Ausblick Franz Gertsch” (2007), p. 51, available in the museum shop).

This technique was in principle not new for him; he had already printed his first woodcuts as a teenager and oriented himself on such old masters as Dürer. In the mid 1980s, however, he developed his own type of large-format coloured woodcut that differed from his early ventures in this technique in several essential points. While he retained this technique’s classic black linearity in his first woodcuts and worked with a system of black contours, the later woodcuts are characterized by a system of so-called ‘light points’—the depiction of the motif results from the interaction of the print’s bright spots.

As in his paintings, Franz Gertsch proceeded here from a photographic model, translating the light from a colour slide projection while working the lime wood printing block with a cutter into a system of incised dots and untreated areas. The conceptual achievement in the realization is remarkable. Franz Gertsch and his printing team finally printed a small edition of his woodcuts by hand on Japanese handmade paper by the now

deceased master Heizaburo Iwano. One can confidently speak of unique works here; each handmade print differs slightly from the others and each one is printed in a different colour.

For the landscapes, Franz Gertsch turned to the nature in the vicinity of his studio and home at Rüschegg, where he and his family moved in 1976. ‘Schwarzwasser’ concerns a nearby river of the same name. With **“Rüschegg” (1988/89)**, a depiction of nature can be seen that succeeded in presenting to the viewer all the details of a complex landscape in the notoriously resistant medium of the woodcut.

In order to attain larger sizes in the woodcut technique as the three-part works **“Triptychon Schwarzwasser” [Schwarzwasser Triptych] (1991/92)** and **“Schwarzwasser II” (1993/94)**, the artist no longer printed several plates on top of each other like in multicolour printing but rather printing several plates next to each other or printing numerous sheets of paper. The monumental woodcut **“Triptychon Schwarzwasser” [Schwarzwasser Triptych]** and the dramatic **“Schwarzwasser II”**, measuring approximately 3 x 6 meters, do not just take up the whole wall, but the whole room. The water flows, as it were, from one panel to the next, the spiralling circle caused by a falling drop of water starts in one part of the picture and continues onto the next. The sixtieth of a second it takes for the drop to fall is noted and recorded in the photograph; it is still there in the woodcut, palpable, manifest.

Just like the women’s portraits, each ‘Schwarzwasser’ woodcut has its own face, its own expression. The viewer can immerse himself in the subtle art of Franz Gertsch, in the fine details, the waves and motions heralded by different nuances of colour that make new visual and sensual experiences tangible.

Room 5 – Film **“Giving Time to Time. Franz Gertsch” (2023)**

The Czech-Swiss director and scriptwriter, Dana Maeder and her team accompanied Franz Gertsch, his wife Maria Gertsch-Meer, and the exhibitions at our museum from 2019 to 2021. The result is an atmospherically dense film which not only allows his companions to be heard, but also provides a perceptive portrait of his studio, his paintings and woodcuts, and above all, of the protagonists Franz and Maria Gertsch. The 52-minute film is available at the museum shop in German (with English and French subtitles).

Room 6 – Paintings and Woodcuts

“Pestwurz” [Butterbur] (2014/15) is the artist’s first painted interpretation of a motif he previously depicted in a woodcut. The increasing intensity with which Franz Gertsch approached his motifs is especially manifest in this instance. One morning, a butterbur plant caught the artist’s attention after dust from the Sahara Desert had settled on its leaves overnight. Representations of the motif in an array of woodcuts and eventually also in paintings followed.

Rooms 1–2, 5–7: Franz Gertsch. Portraits and Nature Pieces II

The woodcuts entitled **“Winter” (2016)** and **“Sommer I” [Summer I] (2016/17)** concern printed realizations of the landscapes familiar from the magisterial Four Seasons Cycle (2007–11). The motifs **“Frühling” [Spring]** and **“Herbst” [Autumn]** have not been realised.

Room 7 – The Four Seasons (2007–11)

The Four Seasons group of paintings from the Dr. h.c. Willy Michel Collection has received a room in the extension which was designed specifically to showcase these works and their fascinating effects in a permanent presentation.

In 2007 the then 77-year-old Franz Gertsch started working on the Four Seasons cycle – knowing full well that he would need about a year for each painting. In 2011 he completed his masterly Seasons cycle with the painting **“Frühling (Spring)”**. Without doubt the cycle can be regarded as a pinnacle of the artist’s late work.

“Franz Gertsch paints the four seasons” – the idea was triggered by a photograph of an autumnal forest from 1994 the artist came across while going through his slides. This image served as a template for **“Herbst” [Autumn]**

(2007/08): After enlarging the slide to oversized proportions, Gertsch projected it onto the canvas as a foundation for his monumental painting. In spring, summer, and winter he revisited the nearby forest to take further pictures. While working on the cycle he followed the changing seasons to capture photographic templates for the other pieces: **“Sommer” [Summer]** is the summer of 2007, **“Winter” [Winter]** is the

winter of 2008, and **“Frühling” [Spring]** is the spring of 2009. Viewers inspecting the whole cycle will also notice how the landscape changed in the approximately twelve years between the first and the last pictures.

The autumn picture marks the beginning of a new phase in the artist’s creative approach. For the first time, he used watercolour pencils to sketch directly onto the canvas and dispensed with the slide projector for a longer period. While the artist’s brushstroke seems more liberal, the painting is still astoundingly photo-realistic when viewed from a distance. To see **“Herbst” [Autumn]** clearly, the viewer has to take several steps back: seen up close, the painting seems abstract and starts to flicker. While his earlier works provide an equilibrium between the close-up view and the photorealistic impression from afar, the balance seems to have shifted in favour of painting.

There is much to discover in the vibrant green painting **“Sommer” [Summer] (2008/09)**. The initial impression is of a planar composition depicting the leafy piece of forest as an impenetrable thicket. However, upon closer inspection the viewer is pulled into its depths while different zones constantly reveal new nuances and effects.

In **“Winter” (2009)** the leafy summer forest has made way for a snowy piece of woodland at daybreak. Trees, branches, and twigs shaped with finely shaded browns cover the surface of the painting like a web; although the snow is everywhere it does not distort the view of nature.

Some branches are layered with snow, the bottom right corner seems to be completely white. Viewed up close, the freshly fallen snow is almost palpable. Franz Gertsch structured the white landscape with the finest nuances thereby visualising the soft powdery qualities of the snow.

“Frühling” [Spring] (2009–11), the last of the Four Seasons paintings, shows a slightly larger section than the previous works. It becomes apparent that all four works need to be viewed to understand the topography of the landscape. Pictorially this painting represents another highlight in the cycle; with a precise, yet liberal brushstroke Franz Gertsch captured the many details such as little leaves, sun flecks, and textures.

The presentation of the Four Seasons in one room highlights the colour harmonies between the paintings. Franz Gertsch limited himself to a reduced colour palette, to a few shades he himself made using pigments derived from minerals, earth, and other sources. While viewing the Seasons as a group, the colours in the individual works form connections, certain shades resurface from one painting to the next. The interplay between the subject, brushstroke, and colouring in each picture is enhanced by the synergy between the paintings.

(Text: Anna Wesle, translation: Katherine Lewald)

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Biography		1999	Solo presentation at the Venice Biennale	2016–19	Woodcuts <i>Winter, Sommer I</i> , and <i>Sommer II</i>
1930	Born in Möriegen in the canton of Bern on 8 March	2002	Opening of the Museum Franz Gertsch in Burgdorf	2018	“Franz Gertsch. Pictures Are My Biography” at the Kunsthalle Kiel
1947–50	Training at the Max von Mühlenen School of Painting, Bern	2004–07	Woodcut series <i>Ausblick</i> with <i>Pestwurz</i> , <i>Waldweg</i> , and <i>Gräser</i>		“Franz Gertsch. Polyfocal Allover” at the Swiss Institute, New York
1950–52	Further education with Hans Schwarzenbach, Bern	2005	Retrospective at the Museum Franz Gertsch and the Kunstmuseum Bern with further presentations in Aachen, Tübingen, and Vienna (2006)	2019	Opening of the annex of the Museum Franz Gertsch in Burgdorf
1955	Marriage with Denise Kohler and honeymoon in Scotland		Honorary Citizen Award from the Christian-Albrecht University of Kiel	2019	Continuation of the <i>Gräser</i> series with <i>Gräser V–VII</i>
1963	Marriage to Maria Meer	2006	Honorary Citizen Award from the municipality of Rüschegg	2019–21	Paintings of the ultramarine phase, <i>Gräser VIII</i> , <i>Blauer Sommer</i> , <i>Gräser IX</i> , <i>Blaue Pestwurz</i> , <i>Blauer Waldweg</i> (<i>Campiglia Marittima</i>)
1967	Louise Aeschlimann Scholarship	2007–11	Four Seasons cycle with the paintings <i>Herbst</i> , <i>Sommer</i> , <i>Winter</i> , and <i>Frühling</i>	2020	“Franz Gertsch. The Seventies” at the Museum Franz Gertsch and the LENTOS Art Museum, Linz
1969	First large-format realistic paintings	2011	“Franz Gertsch. Seasons. Works from 1983 to 2011” at the Kunsthaus Zürich	2022	“Kaleidoscope. Twenty Years of the Museum Franz Gertsch” at the Museum Franz Gertsch
1970	Family and group scenes, “Situations” portraits	2011–15	Group of works <i>Guadeloupe</i> with the paintings <i>Maria</i> , <i>Bromelia</i> , <i>Soufrière</i> , and the woodcut <i>Bromelia</i>		Last paintings <i>Meer II</i> , <i>Cima del Mar</i> , and <i>Schwarzwasser</i> , one <i>Gräser</i> painting remains unfinished
1972	Participation in the <i>documenta V</i> with the picture <i>Medici</i>	2013	“Franz Gertsch. The Secret of Nature” at the Frieder Burda Museum, Baden-Baden		Died in Riggisberg in the canton of Bern on 21 December
1974–75	DAAD Scholarship, Berlin	2013–18	Paintings <i>Waldweg</i> (<i>Campiglia Marittima</i>), <i>Pestwurz</i> , <i>Meer I</i> , and <i>Grosse Pestwurz</i>	2024/25	„Franz Gertsch. Blow-Up“ at the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art in Humlebæk, Denmark and the Deichtorhallen Hamburg
1976	Move to Rüschegg	2014	“Franz Gertsch” at the Les Abattoirs Museum, Toulouse		
1978	Participation in the Venice Biennale				
1980	Initiation of the portrait series with <i>Selbstbildnis</i> ; followed by <i>Irène</i> , <i>Tabea</i> , <i>Verena</i> , <i>Christina</i> , and <i>Johanna</i>				
1986	Temporary abandonment of painting; new focus on large-format woodcuts				
1994	Return to painting, production of <i>Gräser I–IV</i> and <i>Silvia I–III</i> until 2004				
1997	Kaiserring Art Award from the city of Goslar				